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Alexander, Robin John (2013) *Curriculum Freedom, Capacity and Leadership*. National College for School Leadership , Nottingham , (15pp).

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Curriculum freedom, capacity and leadership in the primary school

Robin Alexander

Expert perspective

Resource

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Leadership for what?

Though style is a significant factor in a leader's success, what really matters is how far leadership achieves its purposes. Moreover, the validity of those purposes, the clarity with which they are defined and the arguments and evidence by which they are justified should concern us no less than the way they are pursued. Yet the current preoccupation with leadership style – whether 'charismatic', 'inspirational', 'visionary', 'dynamic', 'democratic' or 'transformative' (or in Ofsted parlance 'ambitious', 'uncompromising' and 'relentless'¹) – can all too readily push such matters into the background; and where style triumphs over substance leaders may pursue purposes that not only escape the scrutiny they require but aren't able to withstand it. Just as charismatic politicians may persuade otherwise discerning voters to support dubious or even disastrous policies, so children may be efficiently taught nonsense and schools may be inspirationally (or relentlessly) led in the wrong direction. Outrageous? Yes indeed, for we know it happens.

Thus, leadership requires mastery of more than how to lead, and educational leadership requires both expertise of a generic kind in the art and skill of leading and specific expertise in the art and skill of educating. We can call these the *dynamic* and *substantive* aspects of leadership, or leadership's 'how' and 'what'. Extending our working definitions for the discussion that follows, we refer to the sum of the different kinds of expertise that a school as a whole is able to command, for teaching and for leading teaching, as its *professional capacity*. As a subset of this, what a school has at its disposal for leading curriculum thinking and planning and for providing its pupils with an appropriate and well-taught curriculum in the classroom constitutes its *curriculum capacity*.

Note that pupils themselves contribute to a school's curriculum capacity, through the knowledge and understanding they bring from outside school to the classroom and the insights that perceptive teachers gain from watching and listening to them at work and play.² Effective pedagogy is in part about unlocking and building upon this prior pupil knowledge. In this thinkpiece, however, I concentrate on the curriculum capacity of teachers and school leaders.

These initial propositions about educational leadership have a further and perhaps less obvious implication. The leadership circle is squared only if leadership is pursued in a way that is true to the purposes for which it claims to stand. This is why the current trend of transferring leadership structures, strategies and hence values from, say, business to schools needs to be handled carefully, and it is why the Cambridge Primary Review (hereafter CPR)³ argued that if educational aims are to have any point at all then they must be pursued in the head's office and the staffroom no less assiduously than in the classroom.⁴ If a school aims to open children's minds, advance their understanding, excite their imaginations, build their confidence and develop their sense of mutual obligation, it is unlikely to do so if its professional culture manifests fixed ideas, limited understanding, closed minds and rigidly hierarchical relationships. A school justifies its claim to be a learning community when, in David Hargreaves's words, 'the learning of both staff and students is governed by a common set of principles'.⁵

¹ Ofsted, 2012b

² See the chapter 'Children's lives outside school' in Alexander, 2010: 63–72, and Mayall, 2010.

³ The Cambridge Primary Review (CPR) is based at the University of Cambridge and directed by Professor Robin Alexander. Independently funded by Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, it was launched in 2006 and since then has published 31 interim reports, a final report with recommendations (Alexander, 2010), a research volume (Alexander et al, 2010) and over 40 briefing papers. It is now in an intensive phase of dissemination, policy engagement and national and international network-building. Following the change of government in 2010, CPR has been in regular discussion with the Department of Education (DfE) and leaders of the government's various reviews, and several of its key recommendations have been acted on. For further information, contacts and document downloads, see www.primaryreview.org.uk. For an account of the CPR's first five years, see Alexander, 2011.

⁴ Alexander, 2010: 191–201; 257–8

⁵ In conversation about a draft of this thinkpiece. My thanks to him for this.

These opening arguments point to a more discerning vocabulary of success in leadership than the question-begging terms in my second paragraph, let alone vague adjectives like good/bad, or strong/weak or the ubiquitous but meaningless 'great'. For example:

- Educational leaders may be judged **effective** if their strategies achieve specific, measurable objectives such as improved pupil attendance, SAT scores or GCSE results.
- They may be judged **principled** if at the same time they pursue a larger educational vision and do not allow this to be compromised by important but inevitably narrow measures of effectiveness and accountability.
- They may be judged **exemplary** if they themselves also model, in the ways they think, talk and act, the attributes of the educated person.
- They may be judged **outstanding** if, and only if, they are successful in all of the first three senses.

My use of 'outstanding' here is deliberate, for I'm well aware that 'outstanding' is the highest grade in the Ofsted inspection framework and that 'the quality of leadership and management in the school' is one of four key judgements which from 2012 Ofsted inspectors are required to make.⁶ As hinted earlier, the 'outstanding' grade descriptor for school leadership makes much of a leader's 'ambitious', 'relentless' and 'uncompromising' pursuit of excellence⁷, as it probably should. However, 'relentless' has unappealing as well as praiseworthy overtones, while if a leader is so uncompromising that he or she is not prepared to listen to others or admit the possibility of being wrong, then a school is in deep trouble.

Aspiring school leaders might therefore find it instructive to compare and try to reconcile the visions of curriculum capacity and leadership set out in the 2012 Ofsted inspection schedule and in this thinkpiece, starting with definitions of 'outstanding' and continuing the exercise with the two documents placed side by side. For example, can a leader be both 'exemplary' as defined above and 'relentlessly uncompromising'? In any event, we need to broaden our account of successful educational leadership beyond the narrow accounts of 'delivery' and 'effectiveness' that have dominated recent years, and we should keep in mind the need for a fit between educational ends and professional means as we consider some of the imperatives of educational leadership in the specific domain of *curriculum*.

Elsewhere, I have advocated the reform of classroom learning through dialogic teaching, but I also suggest that the dialogic principle, and its five conditions – collectivity, reciprocity, support, cumulation and purposefulness – apply no less to *professional* learning and school self-improvement.⁸ In this regard, what I find encouraging about the emerging models of leadership, with their emphasis on empowerment, partnership, mentoring, coaching and the building of social capital,⁹ is that they align much more closely with our current understanding of children's learning and the more overtly interactive and reciprocal pedagogy that it requires than does traditional, top-down leadership. Far from being an impossible ideal, therefore, in many schools what I define as exemplary leadership is within reach.

⁶ Ofsted, 2012a

⁷ Ofsted, 2012b: 18–21

⁸ Alexander 2008a: 53–4

⁹ For example, as discussed in Hargreaves, 2011.

Professional freedoms new and old

This module is launched in the context of an ostensibly greater measure of professional freedom in curriculum and related matters than was permitted during the period 1997–2010. We are emerging from an era in which, in pursuit of ‘standards’, schools were subjected to a ‘tough’ regime – for that was indeed the political adjective of choice – of top-down prescription, micro-management and enforced compliance. Commentators agreed that this probably went too far, and the evidence on what actually happened during this period, to teachers’ skills and self-esteem, to standards themselves (untested as well as tested) and of course to curriculum entitlement in practice, proves the critics right.¹⁰

The coalition government elected in 2010 accepted these strictures, promised to give teaching back to teachers and announced that from 2014 it would leave many more aspects of the national curriculum to schools’ discretion. Meanwhile, the existing apparatus of professional support and/or surveillance, from national strategies, the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), inspection and local authority school improvement partners (SIPs), was to be reduced or dismantled; and school self-determination and self-improvement were more positively heralded by initiatives such as the academies and teaching schools programmes, and by strong advocacy for professional and institutional self-improvement from the National College and its advisers.¹¹

To early and mid-career teachers, this extent of professional freedom may look unprecedented, but it is not. Until the arrival of the national curriculum and national testing in 1988, schools in England enjoyed a greater degree of autonomy than in most other countries, and considerably more than is likely to be on offer from 2014. During the four decades after the 1944 ‘Butler’ Education Act, and especially after the phasing out of the 11-plus test during the mid-1960s, primary schools effectively created their own curricula. At the time of going to press we do not know precisely what England’s post-2014 national curriculum will look like, but we do know that it will allow schools to decide for themselves not just which aspects of some of the non-core subjects they will teach, but in some cases whether certain subjects need to be taught at all.¹² It is therefore essential that we take a long view of the evidence that is now available on the challenges of primary curriculum leadership. Much of this evidence is summarised in the final report of the CPR (which itself drew on over 4,000 published sources) and it is to this that I shall chiefly refer.¹³

¹⁰ The evidence on the trajectory of government policy up to 2009 and its impact on primary education are comprehensively reviewed in Alexander, 2010, chapters 8, 9, 11, 13, 15–17, 20–22 and, in summary form, on 469–83 and 508–10. For additional evidence see the research reviews of Balarin & Lauder (2010), Noden & West (2010), Cunningham & Raymont (2010), Wyse, McCreery & Torrance (2010), Tymms & Merrell (2010), and Whetton, Ruddock & Twist (2010).

¹¹ Notably David Hargreaves (2010; 2011; 2012).

¹² DfE, 2010

¹³ For a historical overview of post-war developments in English primary education, with particular reference to the post-Plowden period 1967–2010, see Alexander, 2010, chapter 3. The chapter also contains a helpful timeline of policy milestones from 1944 to 2010. For the CPR’s discussion of leadership see Alexander, 2010, chapter 22 and the CPR research reviews of Stronach, Pickard & Jones (2010), McNamara, Webb & Brundrett (2010), and Burgess (2010). For a concise history of English primary education going back to its furthest origins, see Alexander, 2001, chapter 6.

Old habits die hard: curriculum policy, leadership, structure and discourse

Assumptions and practices in contemporary primary curriculum leadership are shaped not just by recent policies and the burgeoning leadership industry but more fundamentally by two historically embedded features of primary schools. First, they are staffed by teachers who may well have specialist curriculum interests and expertise but are usually deployed as generalists. Almost inevitably, such teachers teach outside their curriculum strengths as well as within them. Second, compared with secondary schools and as a consequence partly of their generalist staffing and partly of their smaller size, the professional structure of all but the largest primary schools has tended to be relatively flat.

These features are connected. In a generalist culture, in which everyone does everything and is assumed to be competent to do so, there is no pressing need either for an elaborate professional hierarchy or for much by way of leadership of specifics. Conversely, though the large size of secondary schools dictates a more elaborate staff hierarchy and managerial structure, their structural default born of specialist teaching is departmentalisation. So the primary school structure that dominated the first two-thirds of the 20th century was the simplest imaginable: two zones of influence, the head and the rest, 'my school' and 'my class', with the deputy head available for covering in the head's absence but rarely having a significant role beyond that. If there was to be a curriculum leader it would be the head. He or she would shape the curriculum and determine its content, characteristically making rather more of 'my values' and 'my beliefs' than of collective knowledge. Teachers would implement that vision, such as it was, enjoying the often limited freedoms that the head was prepared to sanction.

In the other zone of influence, the generalist class-teacher system that was devised for England's system of 'education of the poor, or primary education'¹⁴ was instituted not for educational reasons but because it was cheap. In the 19th century the basic curriculum was narrower than it is now, so the class-teacher system was also tolerably efficient. However, once the primary curriculum expanded and the goals of primary education became more ambitious, as they did from the 1930s onwards,¹⁵ so the system's limitations become ever more apparent. By 1978, HMI was reporting an alarming lack of consistency in the scope and quality of the curriculum across England's primary schools – which, it will be remembered, still made their own decisions on curriculum matters – and HMI showed a close relationship between these qualitative variations in curriculum provision and the extent and level of curriculum expertise that schools commanded.¹⁶ HMI found it unacceptable, for example, that the scientific understanding of children in one school could be systematically and progressively fostered from age five onwards while elsewhere children could enter secondary school without having encountered anything remotely resembling science, and that such matters depended entirely on the interest or whim of a school's head and the profile of expertise across its staff.

HMI therefore recommended that all schools should appoint subject-specific curriculum co-ordinators who would combine generalist teaching of their own class with cross-school curriculum support, and many schools, though not all, began to implement this. HMI's survey evidence showed that such people, provided they were properly trained and given appropriate time and resources, could raise expectations and improve a school's match between curriculum provision and pupils' perceived capabilities.¹⁷ HMI also signalled, as the curriculum debate heated up following Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin College speech of 1976, that the curriculum lottery exposed by their surveys should be replaced by statutory curriculum entitlement, and this was the key promise and achievement of England's first national curriculum in 1988.

¹⁴ This notorious but revealing definition is from Robert Lowe, architect of the 1862 Revised Code and 'payment by results'.

¹⁵ With strong encouragement from the Hadow and Plowden reports (Board of Education, 1931; CACE, 1967).

¹⁶ DES, 1978

¹⁷ DES, 1978: 96–7; 119; 124

Note that throughout this entire period, both before the arrival of curriculum co-ordinators or subject leaders and after it, there was an assumption that curriculum capacity was a matter for each school *on its own*, supported (or instructed) by local authority advisers. The possibility of partnership between schools, which in 2012 is such a vital feature of the landscape of educational reform, was rarely entertained. Indeed, since school partnership requires power to be shared rather than concentrated as in the 1960s–1980s model of primary headship, back then such a notion would have received short shrift.

During subsequent decades the post-1978 primary curriculum leadership model – generalist teachers also serving as cross-school specialist co-ordinators, consultants, advisers or leaders – was developed and embedded but could be refined only up to a point. So although a House of Commons inquiry (and later, Ofsted) showed that the model was most successful when curriculum advisers were able to work directly with those teachers who needed support in their own classrooms, the primary funding formula was premised on the generalist model and rarely permitted this.¹⁸ Nor did it allow a more adventurous deviation from the established staffing structure and culture, apart from in performance subjects such as music or PE where lack of expertise was most conspicuous. (Lack of expertise can more readily be concealed in non-performance subjects, but of course it may be just as serious.) After 1984, meanwhile, initial teacher training was required to give greater attention to the development of teachers' curriculum specialisms,¹⁹ while with the arrival of the national curriculum in 1988 primary schools moved more rapidly from the simple two-tier structure to a greater degree of quasi-secondary departmentalism, with many class teachers doubling up as year, key stage, subject or special education needs (SEN) co-ordinators and the tide gradually turning towards collegiality and distributed leadership. Paradoxically, the now-defunct national strategies required compliance but also encouraged networking. The process accelerated with the workforce reforms of the 1990s and was greatly facilitated by the dramatic increase in support staff from 75,000 in 1997 to 172,000 in 2008.

In other respects the professional culture of primary schools was less ready to shift. The 1992 'three wise men' report (Alexander et al, 1992) both recorded and provoked strong resistance in schools to the idea even of discussing alternatives to the generalist class-teacher system, let alone introducing them, and found few takers for its suggestion that primary schools might profitably explore a more flexible and targeted combination of generalists, consultants, semi-specialists and full specialists.²⁰ Thus a generalist class-teacher system that had been initiated purely on the grounds of cost had become a way of life with its own staunchly defended professional rewards and claimed educational benefits.

Yet the evidence that this inherited structure and its attendant professional culture were no longer fully fit for educational purpose continued to stack up. From 1997 the apparatus of high-stakes tests, targets, national strategies, league tables, inspection and the rest put an inherently fragile system under markedly greater pressure.²¹ Drawing together the evidence from research, inspection and thousands of witnesses, the CPR showed that the primary curriculum problem could not be explained simply in terms of the 'quarts-into-pint-pots' diagnosis of the 2008–10 Rose review²², but was more complex and – for children – educationally much more damaging. For while there was indeed a common *perception* of curriculum overload, in the sense that many teachers believed that too much was prescribed for the time available, successive Ofsted studies showed that a significant proportion of primary schools successfully and convincingly taught the full national curriculum as prescribed.²³

¹⁸ House of Commons, 1986; Ofsted, 1994; 1996; 1997a. The 'three wise men' report was one of several that directly challenged the inherited primary funding formula (Alexander et al, 1992; paras 4 & 149). Another was the CPR final report (recommendation 150 in Alexander, 2010: 509).

¹⁹ Following DES Circular 3/84 and the establishment of the Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (CATE), precursor to the Teacher Training Agency (TTA), Training and Development Agency for Schools (TDA) and current Teaching Agency.

²⁰ Alexander et al, 1992: paras 139–50

²¹ Alexander, 2010, chapters 16, 17 and 23; Tymms & Merrell 2010; Harlen 2010; Wyse, McCreery & Torrance 2010

²² Rose, 2009

²³ Ofsted, 2008; 2009; 2010

Therefore the national curriculum could not be said to be inherently unmanageable. The real problem had to lie elsewhere, in the way that schools managed, staffed and taught what was required. The CPR argued, citing evidence from both inspection and research, that the more fundamental and long-term curriculum problem in primary schools was one of *curriculum capacity, expertise and leadership*²⁴, the focus of this thinkpiece.

Meanwhile, the principle, since 1988 enshrined in law, that all children are entitled to a 'balanced and broadly based' curriculum²⁵, was being compromised by the overriding emphasis placed after 1997 on standards in literacy and numeracy, defined very narrowly as Year 6 test scores. To this tendency the arts, the humanities and even the core subject of science were becoming increasingly vulnerable, while across the curriculum – and even within the tested subjects of English and mathematics – memorisation and recall were being pursued at the expense of understanding and enquiry, and transmitting information was counted more important than the pursuit of knowledge in its proper sense.²⁶

Thus, the post-1997 reforms had exacerbated the historic split between 'the basics' and the rest of the curriculum, reinforcing what Ofsted called a 'two-tier' curriculum²⁷ in which differential time allocations legitimately set in pursuit of curriculum priorities were compounded by unacceptable differences in the quality of provision as between these two segments. This drastic loss of curriculum balance and coherence was further fuelled by a policy-led belief that high standards in the basics can be achieved only by marginalising much of the rest of the curriculum. In fact, and the point has been central to the CPR's approach to curriculum reform, HMI and Ofsted evidence consistently shows the opposite. Far from being incompatible, the basics and the rest are vitally interdependent, and our best primary schools achieve high standards in both.²⁸ Yet policymakers continued to resist the argument, and the evidence, that standards in literacy and numeracy are raised not by neglecting the wider curriculum but by celebrating it. They were criticised for their obstinacy as long ago as 1985, in a Conservative government white paper²⁹, but this cut little ice, and anyway politicians have conveniently short memories.³⁰ It was therefore encouraging that the CPR's campaign on this matter received prominent support from the expert group advising the government's 2010–12 national curriculum review.³¹

If there was a problem with the discourse of curriculum policy and reform, in some parts of the teaching profession there was also a problem with the discourse of curriculum itself. The CPR found, as had commentators since the 1960s, that all too often – though I stress not by any means universally – the debate about the curriculum in primary schools was infected by reductionist claims and muddled thinking. Subjects, regardless of how they were conceived and organised, were dismissed as incompatible with children's development. Since at birth, it was argued, children 'don't think like that' then they should forever more be denied the opportunity to do so – an argument that seemed to be about disempowering young minds rather than otherwise. 'Themes' were preferred not so much because when confronted by a school-devised thematic curriculum children happily confirmed that they do think like that (do they?) but more probably because they weren't subjects; indeed, when asked about the characteristics of good teachers, the CPR's child witnesses said 'they know a lot about their subjects.' (Interestingly, research on multiple and variegated intelligence suggests that humans have a biological disposition to think in some of the distinct ways that over the millennia have developed into disciplines of enquiry, so subjects may be less 'artificial' than their detractors claim.)³²

²⁴ Alexander, 2010: chapters 14 and 21, especially 431–4.

²⁵ Education Reform Act 1988: 1

²⁶ Alexander & Hargreaves, 2007; Alexander, 2010: chapter 13; Wyse, McCreery & Torrance, 2010

²⁷ The phrase was HMCI David Bell's, in Ofsted, 2004.

²⁸ DES, 1978; Ofsted, 1997; 2002; 2008; 2009; 2010

²⁹ DES, 1985

³⁰ DES, 1985. See also the CPR final report (Alexander, 2010: 243).

³¹ DfE, 2011: 23

³² See, for example, the work of Howard Gardner and Robert Sternberg as discussed in Alexander, 2008b: 44–6.

Meanwhile, knowledge in its limitless variety, richness and transformative power was parodied as the mere transmission of outdated facts and hence rejected as irrelevant to a modern curriculum, thus at a stroke severing the learner from history, culture and some of humankind's principal ways of making sense and acting on the world. In its place, 'skills' were inflated to the point of meaninglessness, encompassing everything that a child should encounter, learn and know (except that the child wouldn't know but 'learn how to learn'). 'Creative' similarly ballooned far beyond its proper meaning, being for some teachers a serious intention pursued with the necessary rigour, but for others a mere shibboleth which invited not the discipline of the truly creative mind but the self-indulgence of doing one's own thing without bothering to argue a proper educational case. As with 'themes', calling such a curriculum 'creative' was believed to be justification enough. Far from elevating creativity, this casual usage devalued it.³³

Into the vacuum stepped the curriculum snake-oil vendors, peddling for a few thousand pounds apiece their 'creative curriculum' and 'skills curriculum' packages to schools desperate for something to plug the gap and lacking the capacity to realise that they – and especially their pupils – were being taken for a ride.

Bizarrely, much of this was justified on the grounds of modernity: knowledge is old hat, we were told, themes and skills are what today's children and tomorrow's world need. But history shows that we had been there before, in the 1960s and 1970s. Here, recycled barely without modification, were the same slogans. Here was the same perplexing urge to disenfranchise the young mind while claiming to liberate it. But since history itself was one of the despised subjects, the modernisers neither knew this nor realised that it was they who risked putting the clock back.

Stopping the rot: rethinking curriculum capacity

The CPR argues that all children in primary schools should be entitled to a curriculum that:

- enacts a coherent and properly argued set of educational aims
- secures high standards in literacy and numeracy yet is also broad, balanced and rich
- engages children's attention, excites and empowers their thinking, and advances their knowledge, understanding and skill
- attends to children's present as well as their future needs, providing a proper foundation for later learning and choice
- addresses the condition of society and the wider world
- ensures progression from early years through primary to secondary without losing its developmental distinctiveness at any of these stages
- is taught to the highest possible standard in all its aspects, not just in the basics.

In its central three chapters, the CPR final report presents the evidence on which this view is based and the 'coherent and properly argued' aims that drive it, and readers are encouraged to read the chapters in full and examine the framework for an aims-driven, domain-based curriculum to which its evidence and argument led.³⁴

³³ See 'The primary curriculum: victim of a muddled discourse' in Alexander, 2010: 245–251. For a commentary on earlier manifestations of this 'muddled discourse' see Alexander, 1984.

³⁴ Alexander, 2010: chapters 12 ('What is primary education for?'), 13 ('Curriculum past and present') and 14 ('Towards a new curriculum')

Yet in some respects what CPR proposed is quite modest, and it is presented not as a utopian vision but as the least that one of the world's richest nations should be prepared to offer its children: hence the emphasis on **statutory entitlement**. This, then, was the bottom line for CPR's evidence to the 2010–12 national curriculum review,³⁵ and the December 2011 report from the review's expert group acknowledges its force, especially in respect of the arguments about the centrality of knowledge, the imperative of curriculum breadth, the relationship between standards in literacy and numeracy and the quality of the wider curriculum, and CPR's concept of a community curriculum to balance and extend what is required nationally.³⁶

Note, however, that our definition of entitlement is about the scope and quality of the curriculum as *experienced by pupils*, rather than curriculum breadth on paper. A 'broad and balanced' curriculum in official documents or a school prospectus is meaningless without a commitment to ensuring that schools have what it takes to pursue excellence in all aspects of such a curriculum. Entitlement relates to the curriculum as enacted, not just as prescribed.

In parallel, therefore, CPR pursued its argument that if the government was serious about curriculum reform then the question of curriculum capacity and leadership in primary schools discussed above could no longer be kicked into touch as it had been on so many previous occasions since the 1970s:

*The long-standing failure to resolve the mismatch between the curriculum to be taught, the focus of teacher training and the staffing of primary schools must be resolved without delay. The principle to be applied is the one of entitlement adopted throughout this report: children have a right to a curriculum which is consistently well-taught regardless of the perceived significance of its various elements or the amount of time devoted to them.*³⁷

If schools were to take advantage of the new curriculum freedoms and to exercise informed discretion over those subjects where attainment targets were no longer specified or the content was for schools themselves to determine, the fundamental principle of children's curriculum entitlement required that schools should be able to demonstrate commensurate *curriculum capacity, expertise and leadership* – those very attributes about which successive HMI and Ofsted studies had reported such disturbing evidence. Accordingly, the CPR recommended a full national primary staffing review which would investigate the relationship between primary schools' curricular responsibilities, staff numbers, roles and expertise available to fulfil these, and the implications for initial teacher training and continuing professional development (CPD).³⁸

In 2011, following extensive discussions between CPR and the DfE, this recommendation was acted on. The DfE launched an inquiry into 'the capacity of the primary workforce to plan and teach all aspects of a broad curriculum to a high standard'. At the time of writing the inquiry is nearing completion.³⁹ It has been conducted in-house rather than as a public review along the lines of that initiated by the coalition government on the national curriculum, but its work has fed into the latter, not least because the remit of the national curriculum review explicitly raises questions about implementation and hence capacity and leadership.

As word about the government's curriculum capacity inquiry spread, so did rumours about where it would lead. This was inevitable given that though conducted in-house, the inquiry entailed several focus group meetings, including one with all the main subject associations, as well as a desk-based literature search. A typical newspaper headline was 'Primary review could spark rise in specialist staff'⁴⁰.

³⁵ Alexander, 2011

³⁶ DfE, 2011

³⁷ Recommendation 125 in Alexander, 2010: 505.

³⁸ Recommendation 127 in Alexander 2010: 506.

³⁹ For the moment, the material arising from the DfE's curriculum capacity inquiry – correspondence between CPR and DfE, briefing papers supplied by CPR, and the inquiry report itself – remain internal DfE documents.

⁴⁰ *Times Educational Supplement*, 4 February 2011

But although ministers may have encouraged such rumours by publicly commending more specialist teaching in primary schools,⁴¹ CPR insisted that this was only one of the options available and in that sense revisited the notion of a broader and more flexible generalist-consultant-semi-specialist-specialist staffing continuum of the kind that was first flagged up in Alexander et al, 1992. Indeed, CPR had explicitly warned that the debate about curriculum capacity should avoid ‘the simple opposition of “generalists” and “specialists”’.⁴² CPR also encouraged government and schools to explore the possibilities of sharing expertise and exchanging staff between schools, a strategy facilitated by the move to school clustering and partnership started under new Labour and accelerated from 2010 under the banner of academies and teaching schools.

What, then, do we mean by ‘curriculum capacity’? We have already emphasised that it both includes but is much more than specialist teaching expertise in individual subjects. As argued by CPR, a school’s curriculum capacity includes, as a minimum, two main components as follows:

- the knowledge of curriculum matters required if individual teachers and/or staff of a school collectively are to engage in intelligent thinking and discussion about *the curriculum as a whole*, and are to move from such deliberation to defining educational aims and planning a curriculum that takes informed and principled advantage of the proffered freedoms, and ‘engages children’s attention, excites and empowers their thinking, and advances their knowledge, understanding and skill’⁴³
- the knowledge of *specific subjects, domains or aspects of the curriculum* that is needed for translating a national curriculum or a school’s own curriculum into viable classroom experiences that meet CPR’s entitlement criterion of being taught to a high standard regardless of their perceived priority or the amount of time allocated to them.

Insofar as they have concerned themselves at all with such matters, policymakers have concentrated almost exclusively on capacity in the subject-specific sense, and especially the expertise needed in the high-stakes domains of literacy and numeracy. Hence the focus of those successive reports from HMI and Ofsted, the 1998–2010 literacy and numeracy strategies, targeted initial teacher training, CPD and inspection, the Rose and Williams reviews of primary reading and mathematics teaching,⁴⁴ and latterly government hints about specialist teaching. The neglect of schools’ capacity in non-core subjects and the curriculum as a whole no doubt reflects the view that when the whole effectively equates with what is prescribed, tested and inspected, such capacity is the preserve of government and its agencies (especially the now-defunct QCDA) rather than schools. Or, more cynically, if the three Rs are secure the rest doesn’t matter.⁴⁵ This was a short-sighted view even then, for a school curriculum is more than the sum of its parts, a curriculum in action is more than what appears on paper, and far from being mutually exclusive, breadth and high standards in the three Rs are interdependent. The view is even more ill-advised now that the task of achieving curriculum coherence has been explicitly handed over to schools.

⁴¹ For example, in the Secretary of State’s speech at the conference launching the government’s Teaching Schools scheme in September 2011

⁴² Recommendation 128 in Alexander, 2010: 506.

⁴³ Alexander, 2010

⁴⁴ Rose, 2008; Williams, 2008

⁴⁵ The evidence in support of this claim of relative official neglect of the wider curriculum is summarised in the CPR final report (Alexander, 2010: 240–5).

⁴⁶ Berliner, 2004: 24–5

Yet, subject to these important caveats, the focus on expertise in the second sense above is correct, for international evidence on what differentiates the best teachers from the rest clearly shows that ‘the degree of challenge that the curriculum offers [and] the teacher’s ability for deep representations of the subject matter’ are pivotal to any teaching that aspires to more than the merely pedestrian.⁴⁵ This is curriculum capacity in the sense that American educationist Lee Shulman uses it, a combination of the teacher’s own ‘content knowledge’ of the subject(s) taught and his or her ‘pedagogical content knowledge’ (PCK) of how the subject is best translated into curriculum experiences that are right for particular children and classroom circumstances.⁴⁷ The key word here is ‘pedagogical’, for pedagogy is what translates a prescribed or paper curriculum into an enacted and experienced one.

The distinction between subject knowledge and PCK is especially important now that policymakers themselves are talking so much about the former. I hope they understand that though knowing your subject is clearly essential, knowing your subject *in the way that is required for teaching it* entails much more.

Yet even this isn’t enough. Specific subject knowledge and PCK are a necessary condition of curriculum capacity but a far from sufficient one, for this formula says nothing about the knowledge and skills with which PCK needs to be combined in order to generate viable and appropriate classroom experiences – relating, in particular, to children’s development and learning, pedagogy, assessment and of course curriculum planning.

Nor of course does PCK in itself attend to the imperatives of thinking about the curriculum *as a whole*, a field where evidence and experience consistently show (see above) that schools often fall well short of the minimum quality of informed debate that is required. The sometimes ill-informed discourse about subjects, knowledge, skills, the creative curriculum and so on that is referred to above and illustrated more extensively in the final CPR report bears depressing witness to this.

The ingredient most commonly and conspicuously absent from many primary schools’ curriculum capacity in this wider sense is **epistemology**: exploration of the nature and relationship of knowledge, belief and experience; of contingent fields such as reason, judgement and imagination; of how within cultures such as ours we make sense of, act on and communicate about our inner and outer worlds; and of the nature of the various distinctive modes of thinking, enquiring and doing through which such sense is made and action is taken – which some would call ‘subjects’, others ‘disciplines’ or ‘domains’.

To some this may seem hopelessly abstruse. To them I would say that it is simply not possible to conceive a school curriculum without reference to questions such as these. Indeed, I’m prepared to stick my neck out – as I first did on this matter in a book published nearly 30 years ago⁴⁸ and assert that much of the prevailing curriculum discourse that dismisses subjects as developmentally inappropriate and knowledge as intrinsically outmoded or irrelevant reflects not so much curriculum creativity or modernity as ignorance about matters which should surely be second nature to anyone involved in the business of educating.

I have illustrated rather than catalogued the wider aspects of curriculum capacity. Epistemology is central, but so too are cultural and pedagogical understanding, plus the direct, hands-on local knowledge of the children being taught and the families and communities to which they belong. I have not listed the aspects in detail but I hope I have said enough to open up the possibility of conceiving of curriculum capacity much more broadly than in terms of subject-specific expertise alone, or needlessly polarised arguments about generalists and specialists.

⁴⁷ Shulman, 1987

⁴⁸ Alexander, 1984

Conclusion: from capacity to leadership

I have argued that curriculum leadership – especially in a self-improving school system – is about building capacity, and I have defined that capacity in two broad senses:

- i. relating to the aims, scope, structure, balance and content of the curriculum as a whole.
- ii. relating to the detailed content, sequencing and teaching of specific subjects.

I have also identified three levels at which curriculum capacity is needed:

- school level: the capacity of school leaders to stimulate, inform and shape whole-school curriculum discussion, debate and planning
- intermediate level: the capacity of subject leaders to plan, guide, monitor, support and where necessary teach their particular curriculum subjects or domains across the school
- classroom level: the capacity of individual teachers to plan, teach and assess those specific aspects of the curriculum for which they are responsible – all of them in a generalist model, one or two of them in a specialist model, or a combination in the more flexible model of primary school staffing towards which some schools at last are tending.

I said at the outset that school leaders need generic expertise in the art and skill of leading, teachers need expertise in the art and skill of teaching, and schools collectively need both. Taking the educational subset of *curriculum* leadership we can now propose the following:

- Curriculum leadership is not synonymous with school leadership, and in today's primary and secondary schools, curriculum leadership is to a considerable degree distributed. Yet heads retain a vital role. Not all curriculum leaders are heads, but all heads are curriculum leaders.
- A head's school-level curriculum leadership requires not just generic leadership skills but also curriculum capacity in sense (i) above – relating to the curriculum as a whole. A school-level, whole-curriculum leader must have a sufficient grasp of epistemological, developmental, cultural and pedagogical matters to promote intelligent, informed and purposeful debate about curriculum aims, values, structure and content across the school as a whole and to ensure that this feeds into meaningful and successful curriculum planning and teaching.
- But bearing in mind that good teaching at any *educational level* is necessarily informed by a sound grasp of the content and pedagogical knowledge of each specific subject, domain or aspect of the curriculum being taught, school-level curriculum leadership also requires strategies for auditing the school's pool of curriculum capacity in sense (ii) above (relating to individual subjects) and judging when and how to intervene if PCK falls short in any subject or classroom, in order that the school can meet the unarguable educational condition of children's entitlement to a curriculum of consistent quality as well as breadth. Developing such staffing strategies requires a completely open mind on the matter of how specialist curriculum expertise can be located and best deployed, and on the balance of generalists, consultants, co-ordinators, semi-specialists, specialists and other roles.

It also requires honest acceptance of the limits to a school's ability to locate or generate the necessary capacity from within, and of the advantages of sharing curriculum resources and expertise between schools, even though this may mean a reduction in autonomy. Or, as David Hargreaves puts it:

*At the heart of partnership competence is **social capital**, which consists of two elements, **trust** and **reciprocity**... When social capital in an organisation is at a high level, people start to share their **intellectual capital**, that is, their knowledge, skills and experience... When people offer to share their knowledge and experience, reciprocity is enhanced along with trust. In other words, as intellectual and social capital gets shared, social capital rises, and a virtuous circle between intellectual and social capital is stimulated.⁴⁹*

- For as long as primary schools choose or are forced by their funding to opt for the generalist staffing model, it can be argued that all class teachers need both whole-curriculum expertise in sense (i) above (because they are responsible for the totality of what children in their class encounter and learn), and the contingent pedagogical content expertise for such subjects as they teach unaided (sense (ii)). This combination, in any case, is arguably a condition of the democratised professional discourse that goes with distributed leadership. Moreover, good school-level curriculum leadership will encourage a climate in which teachers are able to admit the limitations of their PCK of specific subjects and will accept whatever alternative provision is deemed appropriate – a climate, again, that requires the combination of trust and reciprocity to which Hargreaves refers.
- Finally, at the intermediate level, schools need to continue to build curriculum capacity in that sense of cross-school subject leadership on which most of the literature on these matters tends to concentrate.

What does all this imply for aspiring and newly appointed primary heads? Referring back to the initial discussion of how we recognise successful leadership, a school leader will move from *effective* to *principled* in the specific domain of curriculum only if he or she combines viable strategies for leadership and support in specific curriculum subjects or domains with knowledgeable and rigorous leadership of thinking about the curriculum as a whole. With luck, the way he or she thinks and talks about curriculum and the extent to which he or she models sound educational values and principles on a day-to-day basis will also make that leadership *exemplary*.

Here, then, is the leadership challenge. CPR's final report says that the test of true professionalism, in teaching as in medicine, is that the practitioner is able to justify his or her actions by reference to evidence, aims and principles 'rather than by offering the unsafe defence of compliance with what others expect.'⁵⁰ This test applies no less to school leaders, especially in the context of self-sustainability. Freedom entails responsibility, and responsible freedom of action requires the freedom of mind that comes from seeking knowledge, learning from experience, and critically discussing and reflecting on both. If the self-sustaining school is one that doesn't take the easy line of blaming others for its decisions – whether DfE, Ofsted, SATs, SIPs or parents – and feels no need to seek permission to innovate, then equally such a school has no truck with born-again sloganising about 'children not subjects' or the 'skills-based', 'thematic' or 'creative' curriculum.

⁴⁹ Hargreaves 2011: 13

⁵⁰ Alexander 2010: 496, recommendation 60.

Compliance must not be replaced by nonsense. Evidence from research, inspection and shared experience, understanding of curriculum matters, rigour in curriculum discourse, preparedness to acknowledge that the generalist class-teacher system isn't sacrosanct, a flexible approach to school staffing, a desire to share intellectual capital between schools as well as within them and hence enhance the capacity of schools collectively as well as individually, all informed by an unshakeable commitment to 'a curriculum which is consistently well-taught regardless of the perceived significance of its various elements or the amount of time devoted to them'⁵¹: these are the names of the new curriculum leadership game, and the shift from centralised direction to school self-improvement gives our latest generation of school leaders the chance to break the mould.

⁵¹ Recommendation 125 in Alexander, 2010: 505.

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Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH
T 0845 609 0009
F 0115 872 2001
E college.enquiries@nationalcollege.gsi.gov.uk
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